

Center for Teaching Innovation

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Group Work: How to Create & Manage Groups

 Designing Your Course

Students working in small groups learn more and demonstrate better knowledge retention than students taught in other instructional formats. Working in groups provides students with a sense of shared purpose that can increase their morale and motivation. Group work can be incorporated into

almost any course, regardless of size, discipline, or level. The following are just a few strategies instructors have used to create and manage groups in their courses.

Plan for Each Stage of Group Work

- Decide which topics, themes, or projects lend themselves well to group work.
- Think about how you will organize students into groups, help group members negotiate among themselves, provide feedback to the groups, and evaluate the products of group work.

Structure Effective Groups

Groups of four to five members typically work best. Larger groups decrease opportunities for participation and some members may become passive observers. In general, the less skillful the group members at the assigned task, the smaller the group should be.

Assign groups intentionally (based on skills and/or backgrounds). This strategy minimizes the chance that high ability students will flock together leaving others out, allows you to create more diverse groups, and creates opportunities for students to work with peers they otherwise might not have interacted.

Explain how Groups will Operate & how Students will be Graded

- Discuss group task objectives and define the relevant concepts.
- Provide advice about how to work as a team, how to get started, and how to know when their task is done.
- Set forth grading standards. Group work is more successful when students are graded against a set standard rather than each other.

Encourage Productive Group Dynamics

- Assign tasks that allow for a fair division of labor so that each member has a chance to contribute.
- Choose tasks that require interdependence to promote greater interaction and group cohesion.

- Start by assigning simple tasks and increase complexity as students become more skilled at group work.
- Ask groups to set out a timeline and a plan of action outlining group goals and individual responsibilities.
- Check in regularly with the groups to monitor progress and identify problems.

Strategies for Managing Groups

Group work can present unique instructional challenges. There are some strategies for managing them:

- Consider using written contracts – Ask students to sign contracts, generated by the students or by the instructor, that list members' obligations to their group and penalties for failing to meet them.
- Responsibilities might include arriving prepared and ready to share, listening actively, and being supportive of others.
- Resolve issues of unequal participation – Develop a plan of action at the onset. Assign roles and responsibilities to encourage equal participation. Peer evaluations can motivate members to contribute equally.
- Negotiate a poor group dynamic – Do not break up a group because they “don't get along.” Explain to the students that deciding how best to work together is part of the learning process. Encourage students to sort out their differences through open conversation before coming to you.

Sample Group Work Activities

Discovery Learning

With discovery learning, present a novel situation, an interesting puzzle, a set of observations to explain, or an open-ended question for students to explore in a largely self-directed manner. Provide guidance throughout the process by identifying problem-solving activities, facilitating those activities during the discovery process, helping students stay on task, and pointing students toward appropriate resources.

Guided Design

In guided design, lead groups of four or five students through a complex sequence of steps to solve real world problems, providing feedback at each step. These steps might include defining the

situation, stating the problem and goal to be achieved, generating ideas and selecting the best one, defining the new situation that would result when the selected idea is implemented, preparing a detailed plan to implement the idea, implementing the plan, and evaluating and learning from the success or failure of the process and the plan.

Team-Based Learning

To incorporate team-based learning, begin a course unit by asking students to complete an initial set of tasks. Students then take a short multiple-choice test that measures their understanding of the basic concepts underlying the tasks. After students take the test individually, they should meet in their assigned groups to discuss the questions and reach consensus on the answers. Both the students' individual scores and their team scores are recorded and factored into their grade for the course.

Authentic Learning

With authentic learning, the instructor selects a problem that is ill-defined or has no correct answer and requires sustained investigation and collaboration. Student groups may or may not be given a list of resources and should conduct their own research and distinguish relevant from irrelevant information. Students engage in making choices, evaluating competing solutions, and creating a finished product.

Problem-Based Learning

In [problem-based learning](#), open-ended problems are introduced at the beginning of the instructional cycle and used to provide the context for the learning that follows. Instead of teaching students what they need to know and then posing problems, begin with a problem that determines what students study. The problems derive from observable phenomena or events, which students come to understand as they learn about the underlying explanatory theories.

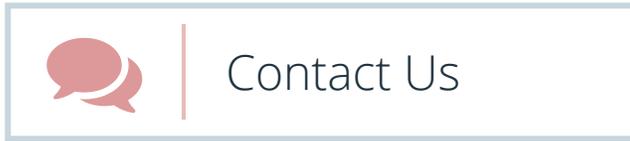
Resources

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